

Dear Father

It blossoms like the aging of winter
and hisses like the call of a bird;
the afternoon swarms like fleas and flies,
over the dead skin of an animal.

Father, learn to love me.
I promise I will cleanse the soil between your toes
and brush the dust from your hands,
if only you will love me.

I will teach the flowers to grow,
gnaw on trees for their sap, and coffin our memories
in the heart of Home.

Together, father, we can yarn the sun
into a ball and toss it to the sea
where a school of fish
will brew our unsullied thoughts,
our new life,
our new breath
as daughter and father.

And when Fall asks for its leaves
we shall whisper in secret
that we have gathered them
in our hearts, blanketing our love
so we do not freeze to death.

Tomorrow, I will smear blue
across the skies from mountain to mountain
and scrape the rivers from their bellies,
cup my hands to your mouth,

so you can drink the love I beg.

Here I Am

Once, American poets were born
in the factories of Detroit,
the vineyards of the Great Valley,
the haunted plantations of the South,
but they were all raised on the plains of Iowa.
They wrote about life enclosed
by picket fences, children creating
kingdoms under apple orchards,
tornadoes turning trees into rows of corkscrews
and carrying trout
miles out of rivers.

Now, here I am, adopted citizen,
not rooted in this land, unable to taste
the spirit in its dust,
to sense its moods in the pollen.
How do I begin my song?
Where do I enter the chorus
when my part is not yet written,
when the conductor won't point
my way?

Shall I start with my birth on Sky Mountain?
Then follow with my childhood,
shaping paper planes to ride the wind?
Or shall I tell of my boyhood,
playing on the shore of the Dragon River
that flowed like a cool blue ribbon
and raged into a yellow monster
during the monsoon season?

Shall I sing of fleeing
my homeland, knowing I was leaving

the mountains and gorges forever?
Should I sing of crossing
the Mekong, floating on a bamboo raft?
Or sing of my coming
to this land, as a beggar,
wishing to share my story,
but unable to speak the language?

If I sing of these things
who would listen to me,
who knows nothing of picket fences,
the sanctuary of apple orchards,
or the lessons of tornadoes?
I will have to relearn
and trust my childhood, give
the wind my song
and let all who can,
hear.

Your Janitor: Is My Father

The Hmong man
rides alone after light,
in a white Toyota pickup,
to pick up, wipe the scraps of
your nine to five.
Opens, closes your gate.

A wastebasket on wheels.
Four sizes of bags for trash.
A mop and yellow container.
The vacuum,
 like a baby on his back,
so loud,
it cries like hell when he plugs it in.

On the floor, your
perforated carbon, hole punched
circles like seeds flown
by the gusty winds of
your careless work.
The toilet is no exception.
 Sometimes leaky urine
 and he is wiping toilet edges.

Under cartons from your
 Denny's, take-out lunch,
 my father,
too careful not to let your paper
Starbucks container, corporate,
flip down,
spill excess brown liquid
in the bag,

seeping
to the outside.

*What is Starbucks? My father asks.
And why do people drink so much of it?*

This man, he pushes
 down your cubicle rows,
 walls tacked with images
 of husbands, wives, kids, grandkids.
The clock in the break room
 spinning,
 ticking,
 full stress,
 still, rows beyond.

To Make a Return

"In a way, we are nothing more—or less—than an encoded memory of our heritage." —Eva Hoffman, "The New Nomads," in Letters of Transit

You are born here,
someplace alien to your ancestral tongue.
Cars replace your two feet
on a spiraling superhighway.
Tract housing becomes a destination
on dizzy roads that look too much alike.
Your father. Your mother.
A young couple far from home
and anything familiar. Stretched
beyond sanity like hitting walls in a maze.

You go to public school,
where you are taught how pilgrims and Indians
ate together, how to pledge allegiance,
and become invisible by turning off your voice
like taking off a jacket.
Never getting the one you want
because of the jobs your parents do not have.
And what you learn on back-to-school night,
when your mother does not know how to
write your name on the chalkboard
of your fourth grade class.

You become jaded by senior year,
swallowed by the language you can
hardly speak, and the assignments that
swarm inside your backpack.
In the midst of eight kids, you feel alone
because they will not let you be.
You wake at 6 a.m. on a Saturday morning

to move couches before the shaman arrives.
There are chickens fussing in the backyard, and
the neighbors might hear.
The night you come home late,
your father burns his words
into the cracks of the narrow driveway.

You move away from home,
chart your course in a crowded landscape.
The cup of freewill flowing to the rim,
like the expensive red wine in your kitchen pantry.
You pour wax from the candles next to the tub
where you soak. No one to bang on the door
while you sink in salts and yesterday's
edition of the New York Times.
On the subway, you watch the highrises
shield your view beyond the city walls.

You wander the streets,
yearning for the recognizable. How you
almost cry at the sight of lemongrass
in a stranger's yard. The old woman
a few doors down whose embroidery
looks like the neon cross-stitched fabric
collecting dust in your mother's closet.
Even the homeless vet who says
he knows of your people
because he fought in 'Nam.

You comb through books, magazines, journals
to uncover scabs, peeling from the wounds
left by a war your parents did not explain,
except to say they had to run.
You shrug it off, and now, years after,
you know the reason why your mother feared
fireworks on Fourth of July.
Why she keeps an old piece of clothing
locked in a suitcase, the same one she wore

the night they left Laos.
And your father, a man of tangled emotions
who says he was only showing love
the day he cursed you from the house.
When all along you think the only war
is the one inside you.

You return home.
To loathe something, but to need it.
Like the twisted red string your mother tied
around your left wrist.
Its tainted mildew scent sometimes polluting,
your skin, but never taking over its purpose.
Never forgetting to bring you back.

Mrs. Saichue

Sweet rice simmers on the gas stove. The pot of boiling water under the bamboo steamer hisses like the breath of a woman in labor. In the oven, cuts of salted jerky darken and crisp. It is seven in the morning, and already the furniture in 109 has been dusted, the linoleum floor swept, the tiled counters and dining table wiped, though the apartment is never disordered with the untidiness of children—at least until the baby arrives. The sudden prospect of a child is overwhelming. After twenty-two years of marriage, living in the same one-bedroom in Fruit Valley, Mrs. Saichue feels she must work harder than ever. Mai Nhia, the new girl in her home, is nineteen, childish, and sleeps in.

A troubled mind can find quiescence when the body is entranced in physical work. But in spite of her constant cooking and cleaning, today's ultrasound appointment has made Mrs. Saichue absent-minded all week. How had she not noticed the nectarines in the corner by the sink, browning and spotting with gray mold? They'd been given by Mrs. Faidang, an older woman in the complex. Mrs. Saichue cleans out the fruit bowl now, managing to salvage two from the batch. She slices up one, skins and eats half. Yuepheng is a good boy's name, she reminds herself as she swallows the sweet pulp. When she washes the stickiness from her hands, she is thinking again of what the doctor's visit will confirm, and though she can't imagine a face, she can hear the child's strong heartbeat—a pulsing, watery sound—a description she's only heard from other women. Already she can see his fisted hands, tight and round as two quail eggs. She can hear his cry for milk and comfort, feel the weight of his body in her arms.

Mrs. Saichue leaves the uneaten half of nectarine on the windowsill above the sink. Outside, the morning air is moist and cold with a blanket of Fresno fog that will lift before noon and settle again in the evening, when her husband is away working his regular late shift. Bare tree branches vein toward a gray February sky. Mrs. Saichue notices such details whenever she peeks through the curtains, sometimes to watch the

children playing by the apartment stairs or skipping rope in the gravel parking lot, their exuberance pulsing in the chilled air. Not many years from now, Yuepheng, too, will be doing these things. At this hour, the children are getting ready for school, pushing their heads and hands and feet through sweater and pant sockets, rubbing sleep from their eyes, yawning over the rush of cold faucet water as it slowly warms. Mrs. Saichue entertains herself with the thought of them, hours later, a cheerful ensemble in front of their teachers, though she has never been inside a classroom herself. She imagines them running on the playground at Lowell Elementary, where she and Saichue have more than once watched them from their old Cressida. She also thinks of their mothers, swamped with household chores and grocery shopping, with tending the small makeshift gardens grown in the narrow beds of dirt outside their apartment walls under the windows and swamp coolers. In the afternoon they'll heat their pots and pans, boil water and fry pig lard, tossing in chopped vegetables and meat and bones. Rice is rinsed and soaked overnight and manually steamed for quality, if one is conscientious about food preparation—otherwise there is the “lazy rice” option of using an electric cooker, something Mrs. Saichue never resorts to, despite owning one.

If the day allows, the women of Fruit Valley Apartments will visit one another. They'll sit next to plugged-in heaters and stitch *paj ntaub*, and listen to the local Hmong station on their radios, or put on one of the many romantic dramas filmed in Thailand that they've borrowed or come to own. They'll entertain themselves with the latest rumor, laugh and weep over long-ago events and people, about familial affairs, each woman calling the other by her given name or title of relation—*nyab*, *phauj*, *niam tais*, *niam hlob*, *niam ntxawm*, *pog*—even if it is spurious. But Mrs. Saichue keeps to herself, always. And for this, the other housewives have come to address her only by her husband's name—no doubt a polite and customary formality for persons of no relation—but an indication of impersonal distance nonetheless.

A month ago, during the two weeks when her husband was out of the country, Mrs. Saichue had kept the curtains shut and the lights on at all hours. Only twice had she stepped out of her home to buy fresh greens, a slab of pork, and fruits from the local Hmong supermarket, these among her few unaccompanied outings in her twenty-two years of marriage. It was enough to stir the curiosity of the female tenants, especially with her already reticent behavior. “I've never seen you shop

alone—is Saichue sick?” Mrs. Seng in 110 had asked the morning Mrs. Saichue returned from Golden Triangle Foods. In her second trip to the store, as she passed the laundry room to her apartment, Mrs. Naolee and Mrs. Thongkoua from 103 and 112—knowing her husband only worked swings—questioned again why he was not with her. “He’s visiting family members in Thailand,” she replied, searching her purse for her keys, almost dropping her grocery bags. She’d already pushed her way through the door before the two women could ask why Saichue had not taken her along.

But there’d been no way to conceal the truth. After his return, the tenants had seen him with Mai Nhia, like an old man with his daughter. It was impossible to keep the curious girl cooped up in the apartment. Not long ago, the women had envied Mrs. Saichue’s marriage, calling them a perfect couple, a devoted pair. “Saichue is such an affectionate man,” they said among themselves, “always treating her so tenderly.” But in their flattery, despite the magnitude of the compliment, there was pity. “What else would they live for than each other?” each housewife whispered. “They’d have less time for one another if there was a child to keep them on their feet.”

The housewives, their gossip notwithstanding, had given Mrs. Saichue herbal remedies and therapeutic massages for childbearing. As she’d expected, no pair of skilled hands or concoction of leaves and roots worked, not even the chants and charms of several revered shamans. They’d learned early on about the problem at the local Vietnamese-owned clinic. Although Saichue—compassionate by nature—never implied that she had failed him in their marriage, she felt she could not forgive herself after the doctor explained the cause. “A woman without a womb,” she had imagined the housewives muttering behind her back. One day, as she was helping Saichue button up his work shirt, the word “adoption” escaped her lips. “It’s our only chance for a family,” she said. Immediately, Saichue shook his head, rare as it was for him to reject her suggestions. She had thought about her older sister and his siblings who lived in other states, but to ask them for a child was out of the question, he said. He worried that an adoptee would not have the capability to love and care for them in old age. She had entered her thirties then, and

despite a few strands of gray hair and the half-circles under her eyes, she had retained her beauty from their younger years. Her stomach was still tucked in and her hips remained unflared, unlike those of women who had given birth. In his forties, Saichue had grown heavy around the gut, had developed sleep apnea, and was diagnosed with high blood pressure. But he was a good husband, unlike the many married men in Fruit Valley whose leisure time was occupied with community friends and clansmen, weekend fishing, hunting, rooster fights, and other women, and who often demanded from their spouses more sons but did not make enough to provide for the household. As a security guard, Saichue didn't make much either. But they weren't lavish spenders, and what he handed to Mrs. Saichue every month was enough to support the two of them. Enough to take her out on some weekends or buy her a new dress. And after all that, there was still some to put by, which she stashed inside an old giant pot, dented with rust, hidden in one of the lower kitchen cabinets. Saichue showed his affection for her publicly. Passing other wives in the apartment walkways, he was never afraid to tread beside her with a hand pressed gently on her lower back, and she was proud of that. When the Fruit Valley men talked about their mistresses, he scoffed at them and told her that he harbored no such desires. He was unchanging in his goodness to her, always keeping his integrity, so she didn't argue when he said a child for them must only be his or hers.

It was in their sixteenth year of marriage, on an evening when she was storing money in the rusted pot while Saichue chewed his dinner of boiled pork and raw ginger, that he asked, "Do you ever wonder how all that money will be spent?"

The question had crossed her mind time and again, but she hadn't given it much thought. She had pondered buying a house a few months ago, and they'd almost offered the savings on a three-bedroom flat, a few blocks from Fruit Valley. Eventually, Saichue said there'd be too much unnecessary space, that all they really needed was a one-bedroom apartment. She had agreed and retracted her decision since she didn't want to remain alone in such a capacious place while he worked.

"Well, it's just good to keep some savings," she said. "The money will help us when you can't work anymore."

"I'll have my retirement money to add to the pot when the time comes," he said, looking down at his food.

After supper, when they had showered and slipped into bed, she reached for him; he clung to her. But no matter how tightly they held on, trembling like young lovers again, the wasted emptiness of the act seized them in the end. Some hour in the night they awoke in the mess of the sheets and sat up and stared into the darkness.

"You think all our savings will be enough for a retirement home?" he asked.

"Don't be foolish," she said. "We won't survive in such a place. They treat old people badly. I've seen it on TV. They'll give us bruises, make us eat what they cook, and we'll have no one to complain to. Don't worry, I'll take care of you."

In the dark he chuckled to himself. "At least we're not living in the old country."

She asked why he'd made such a comment.

"That saying about the childless and aging,"—his voice quivered—"that when there is no one to lend a hand, one will see firewood but no longer feel its burning warmth. One will hear the dripping of a spring but no longer have the chance to drink from it."

"This is America," she said. "We don't need to carry water from the river or chop wood for fire. We'll never be too weak to feed and clothe ourselves. Besides, we're not that old yet. You're just thinking too much."

But they had all the time in the world to think. It was something you could do whether you were at the sink rinsing vegetables or bent over the bathtub with a scrub sponge or glancing at the clock and counting the minutes until your husband arrived home from work.

Saichue yawned. "My snoring will keep you up," he said, pulling the blanket over his shoulders and turning to face the wall. The doctor had recommended sleeping on his side as a treatment for his sleep apnea.

There were no more words between them. In a moment she heard him breathing heavily. But she couldn't sleep. Her eyes roamed the dark as if trying to glimpse the years ahead, and until the first wash of blue light soaked the curtains of their room she had reflected on all her life's misfortunes.

It seemed her journey from Laos to the United States had been like waking from one obscure dream into another. During the American war her father had stepped on a landmine and her mother had remarried before the fall of the country, leaving her and an older sister, as was custom, to the care of their uncle. With his family they'd eluded Communist

troops, crossed the Mekong into Thailand, and spent four months in Ban Vinai refugee camp on rations of rice, meat, and cabbage. She was twelve then, already more mature than most her age, and in her solitude she realized that she did not share the idyllic life of the children and youth who still had parents and who, for that reason, seemed unmindful of any uncertainty before them. It was apparent that she'd have to take willingly what was fated to her, both luck and sorrow, including an unpredictable future in America.

After they had settled in Utah, her sister, three years older, married a man in Salt Lake City and became a Mormon. In 1982 her uncle gave her away, too, at sixteen, for a bride price of one thousand dollars. Saichue had driven with friends from California to visit the state and had met her at a community gathering in Ogden. A quick ceremony and feast affirmed their marriage. She had only hoped then that the kindness and decency she noticed in his character were genuine.

Mrs. Saichue opens the oven. She takes the beef cuts, broiled to a crisp the way her husband prefers his jerky, and dices them on a chop block before pounding them in her steel mortar with a wooden pestle. She adds chopped ginger, and then some chives and cilantro plucked from the plot outside her window.

The children are leaving for school now. From her kitchen, she can hear their voices chattering outside. A father scolds his own to hurry up. Car doors are slamming in the apartment garage, followed by the sound of the aluminum gates opening and scraping gravel.

There is knocking at her door. Expecting no one at this hour, Mrs. Saichue waits until she hears it again, louder this time, accompanied by the faintness of female voices.

It is Mrs. Faidang come to see her for the second time this month. More nectarines? No. She has brought along Mrs. Thong, the young wife from 120. Mrs. Faidang, stocky with small eyes and large freckled cheeks, is gripping a head-sized squash under her bosom. Mrs. Thong, pale and thin, her hair a natural brown and frizzy, is carrying a plastic grocery bag.

Mrs. Saichue welcomes them in. "Come sit awhile."

"It's all right," the two women say. They insist on standing on her doorstep, already looking anxious to return to their own household matters.

"Yesterday, one of our church members donated a truckload of his squashes," says Mrs. Faidang. "This one I brought for you."

Out of politeness, Mrs. Saichue asks if she might reconsider keeping the gourd fruit for her family instead.

"We have more than enough to eat. I took so many, if I don't give them out, they'll just sit and rot. I already gave one to *Nyab* Thong here."

Mrs. Saichue thanks her for the squash.

"There's one more thing," Mrs. Faidang says. "Sai has been telling our husbands that he wants a son, so we thought we could help."

"My husband has been telling everyone that?"

"Here," Mrs. Thong utters in her brittle voice, handing Mrs. Saichue the plastic bag in her hand. She expresses that its contents are for Mai Nhia. "My mother dug these fresh roots from her garden. Chop them and boil some in water. I drank the broth for three mornings in order to give me my first boy."

"Thank you. I'll give them to her." She again invites the women in, but they refuse and turn to go.

"I have rice cooking on the stove," says Mrs. Faidang. "We just came by to give you the squash and the roots. If you're not doing anything in the afternoon, bring some of your *paj ntaub* over to sew with us."

"Or watch a movie," Mrs. Thong offers. "Last night I borrowed a new one from my sister. She says it's very romantic and sad. It was filmed in Thailand a few months ago, right before your husband flew over there."

"I never have the time," Mrs. Saichue asserts politely, thanking them again. Unless she is repairing a loose seam on one of her garments or Saichue's security clothes, she will rarely spend a moment of her day sewing. The movies that Mai Nhia has borrowed from other women are the only ones she's seen in years. Mrs. Saichue waits for the two women to be out of sight before closing her door and locking it.

The rice is still steaming on high heat. She sits the squash in the corner and lays the bag of roots on the counter. Then she spends the few remaining minutes for the rice to cook walking around the space of her home, in an almost awkward floating manner.

In the bedroom doorway, she feels as if she's lost inside a stranger's home. The two figures under the covers are still asleep. Her eyes wander over the walls dimly lit by dawn, not looking for anything specific, just looking, at the yellowing paint and landscape posters and photos—some taken of Saichue's family now living in Michigan, the rest chronicling

two decades of their quiet marriage in California. A collection of shoes lines the foot of the king-sized bed her husband purchased before his second trip to Thailand. She notices a pair of white heels, no longer worn, which he surprised her with during the winter of their seventeenth year, boxed and crudely gift-wrapped by a Fruit Valley tenant's daughter. He drove her that evening to see the 1999 Miss Hmong International Pageant at the Fresno Fairgrounds, bought her roses from a vendor and shared with her a papaya salad, too spicy and too sweet. They posed for a photo with the contestant from Wisconsin, a tall small-shouldered girl, deathly pale, exalted with high cheekbones and a thin dimpled smile. Saichue had anticipated that she would steal the crown from her competitors, but in the end she fell into the runner-up position. The memory of it all comes flooding back to Mrs. Saichue at the sight of the heels, beiged by wear.

One memory leads to another. "She looks too much like your pageant girl from 1999," Mrs. Saichue had said to her husband, four winters after the event, in a northern village in Chiang Rai Province. It was their first flight to Thailand, the roundtrip tickets paid with some of the pot savings. They had planned it six months in advance, landing in time for the New Year celebration.

That day on the village's soccer field where festivities were held, Mrs. Saichue and her husband had spent the morning eyeing the young unmarried women. Many, as well as the men, had worn hand-stitched clothing embroidered with *paj ntaub* and ornamented with jangling coins, brilliant as fish scales. Their *xauv* necklaces were fashioned from silver. Bright sashes of neon green and pink were tied and draped from their waists. They'd all come to *pov pob*, with two parallel rows stretched across the field, the eligible ladies lined on one side facing their suitors on the other, both tossing cloth balls back and forth. The activity allowed unabashed courtship, with each girl being asked by her suitor about her family, who her friends were, what she did with her free time, if her heart belonged to another. Some had brought umbrellas for shade. There were a few old maids and widows, much older than Mrs. Saichue, their wrinkles cracking through flowery makeup whenever they squinted from the sun or giggled. She watched these women *pov pob* with one another until some fellow their senior paid them attention. Some of these older men, grinning with missing teeth, were still married, still prowling for the chance at a second or third bride. Now and then a

couple would break from ball tossing and stroll around the perimeter of the soccer field, engaged in private conversation, looking for the shadow of a tree or combing through the merchandise and food booths. A gentleman might buy for the lady he'd chosen a pair of earrings or a skewer of meatballs dipped in sweet chili sauce. Despite its being December, the tropical weather that swept through the northern hills was cool and dry, enough for the village children to spend their baht on a cup of shaved ice with syrup or a slice of bread folded over two scoops of ice cream. At noon the heat nagged at necks. Hands swatted at flies. Walking by the several pho huts, one would catch the brothy aroma of noodle spices boiling in large aluminum pots. The air had been lively with *k'wv txhiaj*—sung by impassioned individuals to welcome the arriving year, to bid good-bye to the old one, to lament a lost love, to greet a new companion—each poetic verse punctuated now and then by blaring megaphone announcements from a stage constructed out of hewn bamboo trunks. On another day, there'd be the spectacle of bullfights, a little bit of gambling among competitive cattle owners, but this day the soccer field belonged to the wooers.

Saichue was holding his camcorder, taping the young women. "How about her?" he suggested, pointing to a chubby girl with bangs, standing adjacent to the one Mrs. Saichue had described as the pageant contestant from Wisconsin.

"That one might do."

The girl had a bulbous nose. An obvious flaw. She was thick around the hips and talked excessively.

"Do you think she'll find me attractive? I mean, she would have to find me attractive..."

"If she doesn't, there are still others," Mrs. Saichue said.

They had no blood ties with anyone in the village. Neither of them had left any family members behind when they came to the United States, and they had not returned since their days in the refugee camps. But in their clothes, he in a slightly oversized gray suit and turquoise tie, she in an indigo blouse and black slacks, they stood out to the villagers. And as was usually the case when visiting Thailand during the winter season, they were not the only folks from America. Most had come for the annual festivities. Some—despite the fear of Communists—had hoped to leave the village after a few days and venture, if possible, into Laos. Her husband did not express his delight to be back, but she could see it

in his eyes. For her, the intent of the trip had drowned out all the joy and laughter around them, even her own nostalgia.

They'd come to a compromise on the plump girl with the big nose. She was loud, spewing out Hmong and Thai, clucking with laughter that could be heard from afar. Mrs. Saichue allowed her husband his space, as much as was needed. For most of the week she observed them from a distance, the two tossing ball and circling the soccer field, occasionally eating noodles at one of the huts. To assure the young lady of his interest in her, he bought her a skirt and a copper bracelet. Mrs. Saichue stood on the edge of it all, let things happen beyond her sight, told herself it was wrong to feel any heartache. She learned that the girl, nineteen, had fallen out of a previous relationship with a Thai bar owner in the city where she'd been sent by her parents to find work, and that she'd given birth to a son who had remained with his father. The girl took him on her blue moped to visit her parents' farm, which sat on the other side of the village, untilled and overgrown with weeds. Saichue met with the girl's parents, a lanky couple roosted on the outskirts under a thatch roof sagging from years of rain and heat. They were neither concerned about his age nor his wife. "As long as you're willing to pay the bride price," the father said through a veil of opium smoke.

It was unfortunate that the girl had never been married to the father of her child. Having been married once would lower her cost, Mrs. Saichue had thought—watching them on New Year's Day, noticing how she kept pushing her bangs to the side of her face and wrinkling her pudgy nose and smiling too much at Saichue. He explained that she was excited to come to America, that such an opportunity was worth sharing a husband. They drove to the city a few days later to proceed with paperwork required for the girl's immigration. One thousand five hundred dollars were paid to Mai Nhia's parents for her hand, an amount taken from the pot savings. Mrs. Saichue had feared that it would be difficult for her husband to, once more in his life, kowtow on his knees and knuckles for almost an hour during the wedding procession, an obligatory act of respect for the bride's family and relatives. But he'd managed it despite his age and health. Mai Nhia's elder clansmen had bequeathed to her and Saichue the customary blessings and advice, counseling her to be an obedient wife, telling him to love and guide her in his American ways. A small feast was held in the village. Her parents, elated to have finally married her off, contributed a measly hog. She and Saichue had registered

their marriage to ensure her immigration, which would take more than half a year to process.

On the flight back home, Mrs. Saichue closed her eyes and said she would go through it all, as long as it was temporary. Like some of the folks they knew in America, she and Saichue had regarded their traditional wedding to be more validating of their union than a piece of paper—so they never obtained a marriage license. It had allowed Saichue now to fulfill legal requirements to marry someone outside the country. Saichue promised that he would commit to their plan, but that it would take years before they could return to a normal life again, just the two of them. He was confident that a woman who, like Mai Nhia, used marriage as a ticket to America would not remain under their roof for the rest of her life. “She could go anywhere when she’s ready,” he said, “but the child will be ours.”

“I’m tired,” Mrs. Saichue had said to him, turning away to face the window the entire flight.

In the following year, after hearing that Mai Nhia’s paperwork had gone through, they replaced their queen-sized bed with a king. He returned to Thailand, without her, as planned.

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It was in the laundry room, a few days after Saichue’s return, that the Fruit Valley women had asked about Mai Nhia.

“We had to think about our future,” Mrs. Saichue explained. “It was for the best.”

“Perhaps, perhaps,” the women agreed, folding their children’s clothes. “Hopefully he’ll treat you as well as before.”

“I never wanted us to come to this. But a childless marriage is a disappointment for anyone.”

“And we tried with all our medicines and massages,” the women said, one after another.

Mrs. Chafong, an old widow who had lived in Fruit Valley with her late husband and his second wife for as long as anyone could recall, was passing by the laundry room when she overheard their conversation. “Learn to be patient,” she advised Mrs. Saichue. “That’s all you must do now. Love and care for the children they have together, and they might love you in return.”

Mrs. Thong, brashly curious about the situation, asked about their sleeping arrangements.

"On one bed, of course," Mrs. Saichue said, unswervingly.

A man working only a swing shift the next day could stay up as late as he wanted. For her sake, her husband always waited past midnight—at least until she had appeared to be asleep. But how could anyone sleep in such a bed? Though she couldn't make out the words, she had heard Mai Nhia in the dark, her voice against his ear. What did she have to whisper to him during such an act? Yes, he'd given the girl no passionate response, withheld his tongue behind his teeth. Still, he'd done what was meant to be done.

A necessary life, Mrs. Saichue reminds herself now, standing in her kitchen. How many times in the night had she bitten down on her lip until she tasted tears and the iron tang of her own blood, wondering if her heart would stop? When they had learned that Mai Nhia was expecting, Mrs. Saichue said to her husband, "If the child is a boy, let me call him Yuepheng." The tone of her words had been more a demand than a request. The girl was in the shower then, allowing Mrs. Saichue a private moment with her husband. "Yuepheng is a good name," she whispered again to him, a few days after, as if she needed to defend her choice.

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She pours the sweet rice from the bamboo container into a large bowl and stirs it with a spatula, allowing pockets of steam to rise. Then she covers the bowl with a lid and sets it aside on the kitchen counter, next to the jerky dish. Mrs. Saichue spends the next hour idling at the dining table, eyeing the magnet clock on the refrigerator. She won't eat without her husband. It is a good day, Mrs. Saichue tells herself, again and again. She has lived through almost two months. Perhaps she'll take some money from the pot today, drive out alone, buy herself something nice. Mai Nhia knows nothing about the savings, nor has she demanded a share of the household income, but Mrs. Saichue will get the girl something nice, too. Even with all the overseas expenses, she has managed to keep the pot growing again.

At nine o'clock she hears Saichue brushing his teeth in the bathroom. Mai Nhia wobbles into the kitchen straight from bed, paler these days,

her belly slightly swollen in a large pink T-shirt, eyes sticky with sleep. Her bangs have grown longer, curling around her face.

"How do you get up so early to cook and clean?" she remarks, grabbing a cup from the dish rack.

"I don't mind doing most of the work around here," Mrs. Saichue replies.

"The Vietnamese doctor said I need rest."

"Yes, he will tell you that."

Mai Nhia pours herself a cup of water from the pitcher and guzzles it quickly. A few drops dribble onto her chest. "I have to drink plenty today so the machine can see the baby's heartbeat." She wipes the corners of her mouth with the back of her hand and yawns like a fat cat, nostrils flaring. The wet spots on her pink shirt bloom like small roses. She leans her back against the sink counter, propping her elbows up on its edge, a posture that immediately exaggerates the small protrusion of her belly.

"It's going to be a son," Mrs. Saichue says. "In the next few months, I'll be able to tell for sure from the shape of your stomach. From what I've seen, boys are mostly held high, not so low like girls."

"I don't know how people can tell just by looking. Does the doctor stick something inside me and peek at the baby?"

"He will use a machine to see from the outside, just like the one his nurse will use on you today."

"How do you know all this?"

"Women around here talk about their pregnancies to me. That's the only thing they'll talk to me about." When Mai Nhia asks about the bag of roots sitting on the counter, she replies, "Oh, Mrs. Thong brought them for you. It helped give her a boy. I'll chop some up and boil them for you to drink later."

"I don't drink anything bitter-tasting." Mai Nhia scrunches her nose and sighs, her eyes rolling to the side. "You're lucky. I don't want children right now, but I'm doing it for Sai. I was dizzy and throwing up during this time with my first baby."

"Have your children now while I still have the strength to help you raise them."

"I can do that myself. I'm not a helpless mother. I've already found a name for this baby."

"You've already found a name?"

"Yileng."

“Yileng?”

Mai Nhia sighs again. “That’s what I wanted to name my first son but his Thai father chose a Thai name. It doesn’t matter whether or not I have a boy or girl, Yileng will be a good name for the baby.”

“What did Sai say?”

“I told him a mother has the right to name her child. He didn’t say anything after that. Besides, what could he say?”

“It’s past nine,” Mrs. Saichue indicates, looking at the clock. “Go get yourself ready. We’ll eat before Sai takes you.”

“You’re not going with us?”

“There’s no need for me to be there. If I go, I’ll have to sit in the waiting room. Or in the car.”

When Mai Nhia leaves the kitchen, Mrs. Saichue gets up from her chair, suddenly annoyed with the ache in her ankles from standing up all morning. She begins to set the table. In a few minutes, she hears the girl hawking and spitting like a wounded animal in the bathroom. Toilet water splashes, enough to douse the plastic seat, and she wonders who will clean it afterward. There is a high-pitched cry, followed by whimpering. She hears her husband offering Mai Nhia his words of comfort, she imagines the palm of his hand on the girl’s back, gently rubbing it.

Saichue appears in the kitchen a moment after, wearing an ochre button-down shirt he bought in Thailand.

“How is she?”

“She’s feeling dizzy. She says she has a craving for pho this morning.”

“But I cooked.”

“I know,” he sighs, his eyes fearful. “We’ll have pho after we see the doctor. And then we’ll have your cooking later.”

“I’ve already eaten. I got up early and couldn’t wait for the two of you. Go without me.”

“But don’t you want to go...”

“No need for me to squander money at the restaurant. The pot can use what I’d be wasting, anyway.”

“I meant to the doctor’s.” The expression on his face is quietly alarmed, almost sad.

“I have other things to do. The clothes need to be washed, the house has not been vacuumed—besides, it’s not me the doctor needs to see.”

A vastness spills between them now. In a minute or two, this privacy of theirs, this rarity, will end when Mai Nhia emerges from the bedroom.

Though they'd never spoken about it, anyone could have sensed what this sort of life would entail. How could one ever endure such a marriage without the slightest sense of worry, envy, anger, doubt?

"I heard the two of you," he mutters, almost apologetic. "I heard her telling you about naming the baby."

"Yuepheng or Yileng, why should it matter to me?"

"It shouldn't matter to us," he says. "We should be happy we're having a child."

"I am happy."

"It's foolish to assume that we are having a boy."

"We've both been."

Mrs. Saichue looks at her husband, as if for the last time, her mind's eye taking in the entire moment: his staggered expression, his ochre shirt, the sun coming brightly through the window and splashing on the tiled counter and linoleum floor, the crisp smell of broiled beef, the buttery aroma of steamed rice, the sweet scent of nectarines rotting in the trash bin. Another memory for a fated life. She turns away to repeat one of her kitchen chores, allowing him to leave. In a moment the front door closes, gentle as a secret, with Saichue and the girl walking out of 109 like father and daughter. The curtains are drawn tight. Sitting alone in the apartment, Mrs. Saichue eats a fist of rice with mashed jerky. An unspeakable desire fills her and she finds it difficult to breathe. "One will see firewood but no longer feel its burning warmth. One will hear the dripping of a spring but no longer have the chance to drink it." She imagines spending all of their savings today. Or putting the pot on the stove and turning the knob—yes, that's what she must do! But the fervent moment passes as she finishes her meal. A quiet walk to Lowell Elementary suddenly seems necessary. She'll catch the children at recess. If fortune allows, she'll find a dropped quarter or dime for the pot. When she leaves the apartment, she takes the last nectarine from the fruit bowl and stuffs it in her coat pocket. Forgotten now on the windowsill is the half from earlier, soon to dry up, wrinkling to a heart that no one will eat.